



Thomas Edward (M.D.) Bryant, Sr.



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Thomas Edward (M.D.) Bryant, Sr.

Thomas E. Bryant, a physician and lawyer who with first lady Rosalynn Carter led the President's Commission on Mental Health, an advisory board that called national attention to the shortcomings of psychiatric care in the late 1970s, died Dec. 9 in a car accident on Maryland's Eastern Shore. He was 75.

According to state police, Dr. Bryant crossed the center line of a road in his hometown of St. Michaels and collided with a pickup truck.

Dr. Bryant trained in medicine and law at Emory University in Atlanta but did not wish to pursue either career in isolation. While working on the federal War on Poverty program in the late 1960s, he saw the poor quality of health care — particularly mental health treatment — in underprivileged communities.

“Mental health is not a sexy topic,” he once told *The Washington Post*, but one that affects millions of Americans. At a time when the medical community overlooked mental health, Dr. Bryant was one of the people who helped move the issue “to the front of the bus,” said Joseph Califano Jr., who served as secretary of health, education and welfare under President Jimmy Carter.

Dr. Bryant was best known for his association with Rosalynn Carter, who had long made mental health awareness one of her priorities as first lady of Georgia and then of the United States. She was inspired, in part, by the memory of a Carter relative who had been institutionalized in a state mental hospital.

In 1977, Jimmy Carter established the presidential Commission on Mental Health to investigate how mentally ill Americans were being “served” and “under-served.” He planned to nominate his wife to lead it. At the last minute, on the advice of the U.S. attorney general, he named her “honorary chairman” and made Dr. Bryant, then president of the private Drug Abuse Council, executive director and chairman. The first lady provided critical leadership, but Dr. Bryant “ran the show,” said Steven Sharfstein, a former president of the American Psychiatric Association and one of Dr. Bryant's staff members on the commission.



Dr. Bryant was described as a consensus-builder who knew how to use his political connections — with the first lady and others — to advance the commission’s agenda. Faced with the threat of spending cuts for mental health training and only a modest increase in research funds, Dr. Bryant “played his ace,” the National Journal reported in 1978. He showed up at the Office of Management and Budget with the first lady in tow.

After the meeting, funding for research related to alcoholism, drug abuse and mental health increased to \$40 million from \$11 million.

The most significant outcome of the commission was the passage of the Mental Health Systems Act of 1980. It was a major revamping of federal mental health policy — the first in years — and one that sought to treat mental illness patients in their communities. The legislation was effectively repealed during the Reagan administration, which sought to curtail federal control of certain health issues.

In a statement, Rosalynn Carter called Dr. Bryant her “trusted advisor” as they sought to “end the terrible stigma against mental illnesses.”

Dr. Bryant subsequently worked on mental health issues with the Carter Center’s Mental Health Task Force and the Rosalynn Carter Institute for Caregiving, both in Georgia. He also served as president of the Washington-based National Foundation for Mental Health.

Thomas Edward Bryant was born Jan. 17, 1936, in Demopolis, Ala. He received a bachelor’s degree in 1958 and a medical degree in 1962, both from Emory University. After serving as an Air Force flight surgeon in Germany, he returned to Emory and received a law degree in 1967.

He came to Washington in the late 1960s and became health affairs director of the Office of Economic Opportunity, a federal agency that helped run many of the social programs established through President Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty. His marriage to Lucie Thrasher ended in divorce. Survivors include his companion of 17 years, Albert “Brandt” Petrasek of Baltimore and St. Michaels; two children from his marriage, Thomas E. Bryant Jr. of the District and Evelyn Evans of Jupiter, Fla.; and six grandchildren.



Tribute Wall

Thomas Edward (M.D.) Bryant, Sr.



Margaret Heibold posted:

Tom Bryant, Jr. and Family. Our deepest sympathy to you on the death of your father. May God comfort you with the memory that your father loved all of you. Margaret Heibold and family.

December 29 at 8:00 PM



Memories only last if you share them

Join us in honoring Thomas by contributing to a collection of shared memories.



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